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Slow Movements in Digital Literature

*McDonaldization* - a term originally coined in 1993 by George Ritzer to describe a nation of sameness (read: blandness) (Ritzer). There is arguably a second use for this word, as seen in American culture today: the need to obtain and consume information at lightning speed. This push against McDonald’s, as a society, allowed Americans to fill their souls and communities, rather than succumb to food that is simply filling their stomachs quickly through the Slow Food movement. McDonaldization also seems to be occurring in the way readers consume their online information. With this change in consumption of information from printed books to online news, academic articles, and born-digital literature, comes many distractions. Facebook, Twitter, and flashing advertisements have shortened reader’s attention spans, making it difficult to finish an entire news article, let alone close-read a born-digital literature work as one would a poem or novel (Carr). In literature, readers could co-opt the concept of the Slow Food movement to create a Slow Reading movement.

Like the Slow Food movement, perhaps reader's attention woes can be appeased by a Slow Reading movement. Throughout this paper, I will outline the main concerns that are being stated currently in the digital literature world, and offer a different view of how *society* may be affecting our close-reading skills, rather than the distractions of the internet. Perhaps Google is not making readers stupid as Nicholas Carr concludes in his 2008 *Atlantic* cover story, thus there is no need to abandon digital literature before it has lost its deciduous teeth. Literary kin certainly will not take Clay Shirky’s argument that *War and Peace* is no longer read because, simply, it is boring and readers have moved beyond Tolstoy. These are the two ends of the spectrum, with academics peppering themselves on either side - to be with canonical literature or not to be with canonical literature. However, there is a third option, one that seems vaguely concerned with digital media and literature, but offers the best middle ground and explanation for reader’s attention deficit. That is, society’s role in abandoning close-reading habits: a McDonaldization of reading. Finally, I am arguing that, in a world of many choices, readers have the option to curate their intake to close-read a born-digital literature work.

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*“Our basic instinct is to keep shifting our attention among lots of things simultaneously.”* -Nicholas Carr (Carr, 9:40)

In a commentary on his full-length expansion of his *Atlantic* article, “Is Google Making Us Stupid?”, Nicholas Carr argues that new tools, especially the computer, are changing the way readers think. Carr defends his claim with evolutionary thought, saying that, of course cavemen needed to shift their attention, they didn’t want to get clubbed on the head! Readers then, Carr says, perform an unnatural act by sitting down with a book for hours of reading. Yet, this is what readers have done for centuries, as both a means of entertainment and as a catalyzation of thoughts. Now, as digital literature becomes more prominent in university classrooms, and in the homes of readers looking for a composition in a format other than print, readers are faced with the implications of a fast culture. John Miedema, a leader of the Slow Reading movement, says readers, and university professors frustrated with student reading habits - should think about the implications of living in a fast culture: “The real problems are our weakness for speed and our attempts to attend to too many things at once. We cannot accelerate our lives indefinitely. At some point we have to slow down to get a handle on our information.” (Miedema) Reading online bursts the door open for distractions: Facebook, Twitter, and the latest Presidential updates, but do users need to attend to them as soon as the notification blinks?

Nicholas Carr is extremely anxious about these distractions and what they mean for literary reading. In “Is Google Making Us Stupid?”, Carr shed light on an issue that many around him were ashamed to admit: the more information he consumed on the internet, the less he could focus on and deep think about a stretch of prose. In his article, Carr concludes that yes, the ability to search for a piece of information with Google quickly is reshaping a reader’s mind, switching their neural circuitry, so that they are no longer able to deep read a text. In making his argument, Carr states,

I think I know what’s going on. For more than a decade now, I’ve been spending a lot of time online, searching and surfing and sometimes adding to the great databases of the Internet. The Web has been a godsend to me as a writer. Research that once required days in the stacks or periodical rooms of libraries can now be done in minutes. A few Google searches, some quick clicks on hyperlinks, and I’ve got the telltale fact or pithy quote I was after. (Carr)

He then goes on to question the implications of this quickness. Rightfully so, he is concerned that these snippets, surrounded by flashing advertisements, have no chance of being read in a thoughtful, deep way due to the irrelevant information surrounding the text to be read. In another understanding of his sentiment, though, a different conclusion can be taken from Carr’s ideas of reading online. Perhaps he no longer immerses himself in texts, not solely because the internet has changed his brain circuitry, but because he no longer lives in a world that fosters the habit of deep reading. Because the content on the internet virtually exploded, seemingly overnight, users seldom stopped to ask the questions, “What could consuming texts at hyper-speed do to our ability to critically think of a text? What will happen to our attention span if we jump quickly from one thought to another? *Should* we jump quickly from one thought to another?” Instead, and rightfully so, the novelty and ability allowed the internet to saturate homes across America.

In speaking about the deliverance of literature on the web, Curtis White in his article

“The Latest Word” offers heavy criticism, like Carr, on the surrounding advertisements:

The enormous fact to be overcome is this: our rulers need spend very little time worrying about what artists are up to. They don’t need strategies for managing their disruptions...Literature on the Web comes managed from its beginning. And this for a simple reason: it cannot sufficiently distinguish itself from the vast reaches of mere content.

White’s thoughts are not the scope of this paper, but they are worth considering in conjunction with Carr’s work as the discussion of reading and creating digital literature continues because digital literature is well-poised to answer the following two challenges: How can digital literature subvert a culture? How can it advance thinking? These questions are directly related to this discussion because of the affordances that digital literature provides, if these work are read beyond the distractions. Thus, White and Carr seem to want to ensure that the media used to create digital literature is not boxed in by flashing advertisements that subsume the message of the medium.

The first step to avoiding this subsumption is to accept that, societally, readers need to change their habits of reading to fit the new media that are being presented. It would be due-diligence to understand that the media used in the creation of digital literature, though allowing for marginalized communities to write in an easier manner than via traditional print publishing, the internet is inherently tied to our capitalistic society via algorithmic data that pushes our interests in our faces, constantly. Digital literature authors’ ideas and narratives have been lessened by the flashing advertisements and news updates that upset the reading spaces they are attempting to create.

These are Carr’s and White’s concerns with reading online, and thus are concerns of reading digital literature. These concerns allow me to now ask the following: how do readers critically read a piece of digital literature, the way that same reader would critically read a novel? Which leads to perhaps an even more important question: how can literature professors teach students to read digital literature with critical, literary eyes?

Another question to consider, then, is are present-day readers the "antiquated devices" (Hammond) that digital literature is challenging? With Carr’s statement of a reader’s unnatural habits in mind from earlier in this discussion, it can be argued that literary readers have trained their brains to pay attention to long spans of reading. Therefore, I posit that close-reading is a skill that can be learned again, if fostered. In fact, it is imperative that it is, so readers may enjoy the contexts and meanings of both print and digital literature.

Both print and digital literature serve their purposes: printed books give readers a tactile feel, and have room to write in the margins, giving a reader a direct line of communication with the printed text. Digital literature offers composers freedom to compose in a nonlinear fashion, and allows affordances with incorporating media or hypertext allowing the author to make connections for readers that would be impossible in a printed text. And perhaps the greatest achievement of born-digital literature is that authors can make what they want, when they want, by themselves or in collaboration with kindred spirits.

Along with Carr and White, Davida Charney in her text, “The Impact of Hypertext on Processes of Reading and Writing,” is concerned with reader ability to close-read texts. With hypertext, readers must pay attention to and choose whether to follow a linked path.

Charney also notes that the schema of a text allows readers to better understand it. As they move through digital works, it should be considered that there will always be a barrier of understanding due the increasingly loose network of schema in born-digital works. Or, born-digital works may be more understood if schema were used when creating digital text, though that is contradictory to their upbringings (14). Charney goes on to say,

In particular, readers of an object-oriented (divided) organization are more likely to create a well- integrated representation of each object but will find it more difficult to keep track of their similarities and differences. The text itself does little to push the reader to create these interconnections (though the reader is, of course, free to do so). In contrast, readers of an aspect-oriented organization will focus on the similarities and differences and as a result will also be forced to create cross-referenced representations of each object (through the costly switching process).” (15-16, cited from Wolfgang Schnotz)

While this pertains to hypertext, it can be imagined what distractions can do to the close-reading process, as I have been arguing. If a reader’s attention is divided while reading a digital text, it *must* be in a way that is informative to the text itself. Therefore, and to state my entire argument, readers of digital literature works should not assume they can read a digital literature work while attending to text messages, or while scrolling through their Facebook newsfeed. I have a hunch that readers knew this already, though. There are distractions that we, as a societal whole, understand are useless to our understanding of a text while consuming it. Yet this does not stop the distraction. It is not unreasonable to say, based on Charney’s assertions, that reading a digital literature work without these distractions - therefore, creating a habit of close-reading digital literature instead of dividing our attention - would inform our understanding of that text in an in-depth way, similar to reading a printed book.

It is an antiquated perspective to think that digital literature is the only culprit responsible for shrinking attention spans. This discussion needs to be more nuanced, as well as broader to consider America’s McDonaldized society role.

John Miedema, a proponent for the Slow Reading movement, states this in his book, *Slow Reading*:

Digital technology alone is not a threat to reading, but rather the proclivity to speed up life to the point that reading becomes problematic. Digital technology is typically used to make life more efficient, but to some extent reading will be at odds with efficiency. Reading takes up time, and it has the power to conjure us away from the present moment.

Thus our McDonaldization of culture, a need to pump up individual efficiency, will always challenge close-reading. It is our responsibility to not let this occur. If we expand our consciousness, we realize that many points are converging on an axis. We cannot sit by idly and blame these convergences - or distractions - for the lack of close-reading skills that we have not been fostering as a society.

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Despite the terror of loss for close-reading, digital literature available now does not provide readers with a piece that explicitly fosters close-reading. Of the common digital literature taught in universities are works from Young-Hae Chang Heavy Industries (YHCHI) and works by Emily Short. I will now take some time to discuss specific compositions from both creators - *Dakota* and *First Draft of the Revolution*, respectively - and their goals for their born-digital works in this section.

*Dakota* by YHCHI is quite a paradoxical work, as Adam Hammond notes (185). Like much of YHCHI’s compositions, *Dakota* is a fast-paced, flashing poem set the fast-paced, swelling drum beat of “Tobi Ilu” from Art Blakey’s *The African Beat* (1962) (Hammond). Everything about their work encourages a reader’s adrenaline to surge, including the beginning countdown sequence. What does this poem say? A reader would have to view this Flash animation multiple times to tell. Certainly, a reader could not indite the poem’s words without carefully pausing or taking screenshots of the text, if they know how to make either of these moves. Then enters two other conundrums: how long is this text, and is it worth viewing? Upon clicking on the link for *Dakota*, readers “have roughly two options: to pay attention, or to do something else.” (Kangaskoski 2) It would be understandable, given a reader’s conflict between efficiency, time, and reading as has been discussed thus far, that many readers will choose to do something else. Even viewed once, this composition seems impenetrable to interpret, therefore not lending itself to close-reading, on the surface.

However, Hammond is correct in calling *Dakota* a paradoxical work for a reason: there is significant intertextuality in this YHCHI poem.

As Jessica Pressman has shown,39 *Dakota* is an intricately structured retelling of Ezra Pound’s first and second *Cantos* - which in turn present an intricately structured retelling of Homer’s *Odyssey*, a foundational text of the Western literary tradition. The parallels between the works are overwhelming once you begin to look for them. (Hammond 184)

Reaching this level of understanding allows a reader to approach *Dakota* as a literary text, rather than an impenetrable mess of flickering text and heart-pumping drum beat. Thus, *Dakota* could be a candidate for forcing slow reading of digital literature. I hesitate to give this work this specific merit, though, as YHCHI’s goal is not to challenge slow reading, but rather to “explode the very notion of multimodal born-digital literature.” (Hammond 184) Essentially, what can digital literature be? Certainly not e-books. No, what can digital literature be when using the multimodal affordances of computers and the internet? Of concern to this paper, though, I must keep in mind how can these affordances can encourage slow reading of digital literature, rather than “explode” expectations.

Emily Short is another popular digital literature author, interactive narrative creator, as well as a consultant for Interactive Fiction (IF) writers needing a professional eye detail of twists and turns in an IF work. Her work, *First Draft of the Revolution* is the first I have found that could be considered a digital literature piece forcing slow reading by asking readers to edit letters sent between the characters. The following is the Editorial Statement provided on the eliterature.org page for *First Draft of the Revolution*:

Emily Short’s *First Draft of the Revolution*, designed and coded by Liza Daly, is an experiment with advancing the form of interactive fiction while pushing forward its cross platform accessibility (the work is built in HTML5 and has been ported to EPUB3, an open ebook format). The work invites the reader to engage in the act of writing, creating a metafiction that invites us to contemplate the very act of letter-writing and correspondence, and what the process of editing reveals and conceals. The work is essentially an interactive epistolary novel, drawing on an era when letter-writing was an act of contemplation rather than haste. We learn about the two characters (Juliette and Henry) as we get inside their heads and dictate the seemingly mundane details of their correspondence.

This digital literature work is penetrable because it reads like an ebook. Granted, readers can change the text, but the necessity to close-read the letters is nil, though the work allows readers to question their writing - i.e. how they would like to say something - with the utmost scrutiny. The reader’s ability to change the meaning and the story is such an affordance of digital literature that Emily Short masters times over. Yet, when it comes to a slow reading movement of digital literature, this work still falls short.

Thus, the discussion is still halted at the question from Adam Hammond in his work, *Literature in the Digital Age*: “Is it really possible to integrate a form like literature - a form that usually requires slow, careful, close reading - into a noisy, colorful, flickering space combining music and moving images, or do such environments overwhelm the literary experience?” (176)

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*Sometimes we must slow down and read at a reflective pace and print facilitates that. Print and slowness have a close relationship. Print is fixed; the ideas will not change during a reading. A book is linear and long, encouraging the reader to recreate the author's original sequence of thought. Print persists because it is a superior technology for integrating information of any length, complexity or richness; it is better suited to slow reading.*

*-John Miedema*

There are already, of course, proponents of a Slow Reading movement. Among them is John Miedema, author of a book on the subject titled *Slow Reading.* As Miedema states in the epigraph and earlier in this work, Slow Reading is focused on facilitating close reflection on a text. However, this movement as he defines it is still focused on print books as the facilitators, while leaving out the issue of reading digital literature slowly entirely. While print is still here, a medium literary folks, I am sure, will never let vanish, there is a need to consider other forms of composition - i.e. digital - as literature because of digital literature’s inherent ability to subvert norms of print culture because these works can be self-published by marginalized groups already discussed. And while it is Nicholas Carr’s concern that a reader’s neural circuitry cannot handle the distractions inherent to the media, readers have a choice to adapt well to reading digital literature by fostering habits of close-reading while reading digital literature. Thus, born-digital creators can be conscious of these choices by creating digital works that ask readers to do so.

What would such a digital literature piece look like? While I also think that critically reading a printed text is not an inherent ability, it is certainly easier to do so with a printed book than digital literature. The first step, then, is to realize that checking Facebook while reading a digital piece is not, by definition, reading the text. This would be the equivalent of skimming a literary text - readers gain a vague understanding, but grasp none of the nuance. Miedema recognizes this, too, in *Slow Reading*:

Reading is connected to literacy and critical thinking, but digital technology is not the primary villain. The real problems are our weakness for speed and our attempts to attend to too many things at once. We cannot accelerate our lives indefinitely. At some point we have to slow down to get a handle on our information. Slow reading represents balance.

We should participate in these digital spaces, if only because of their potential to subvert culture. They are important to know. To *know.* To study. But how do we accomplish this with our cultural expectations to go, go, go? How do digital literature creators author a text that fosters close-reading?

Based on what has been discussed through this paper, authors considering this challenge could consider creating a text that literally asks the reader to have a dialogue with the text. Like Emily Short’s *Galatea*, an IF work that allows the reader to speak with Galatea, a statue beauty, but with more expectation. As a reader, I can ask Galatea questions, attempt to move her, and examine parts of her and the surrounding gallery in which she is housed. Expanding on Short’s composition, imagine a digital literature work that is similar to a virtual seminar on the piece being read. Before moving on from sections of the text, a reader could be asked if there are metaphors within the work, and what they may mean. Obviously, there is a caveat to this type of work: who would work behind the curtain to ensure the reader is putting thought into these questions? My conceptualization of these texts, though, would purely be used for readers to practice critical thinking of a digital literature piece. Then, ideally, readers will transfer their reading skills for print to the digital medium.

This is only one suggestion that born-digital literature authors could work with to create texts that will subvert the McDonaldization of reading. Though Nicholas Carr offers a well-thought out and well-researched argument on why digital reading is not inherently suited for close-reading, there is a need for another method of gaining a close-reading of a text other than reading a printed book. While the Slow Reading movement is in existence, its focus on printed text, too, attempts to leave digital literature before it has had a chance to flourish. Therefore, it is time to take the responsibility of close-reading upon ourselves, the literary readers, by asking for born-digital works that work our attention span muscles, and by closing our Facebook browsing window.

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